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Writing Suicide in the Early Nineteenth Century: Carl von Hohenhausen's 'Nachlaß'

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Focusing on the case of Carl von Hohenhausen (1816–1834), this article examines the socio-cultural, literary, and educational contexts of writing ego-documents in extremis in the early nineteenth century. The diaries and suicide notes which form the core of Carl's 'Nachlaß' (the personal writings and documents he left behind) reveal how his upbringing and private reading practice, his school training — especially in the art of letter writing — and the model presented by his paternal grandmother's final farewell messages shaped his approach to writing before suicide. To contextualize the 'Nachlaß' and to throw into relief some of the trends in public discourse about suicide in the period, the posthumous publication and reception of Carl's texts is also considered.

Keywords: Hohenhausen, suicide diary, suicide note, letter writing, education history, Victor Hugo's Le Dernier Jour d'un Condamné, ego-documents, autothanatography

I. A very brief introduction

How does anyone, at any given time, learn how to write before death? Who teaches us about suicide notes? In what ways does writing help us negotiate the end of our life? The suicide of Carl von Hohenhausen — or rather the writing and publishing activities which preceded and followed it — lend themselves well to exploring these questions: the young German nobleman was only eighteen when he took his life in 1834. His age notwithstanding, he left behind no less than eight suicide notes, a number of diaries, and several other texts directly or indirectly related to his death. By focusing on these writings, this article will provide insights into the private, literary, and educational contexts of ego-documents written *in extremis* in the early nineteenth century. The discussion will highlight three aspects: firstly, the functions of and the relationships between different autothanatographical genres, such as the suicide diary and letter; secondly, the role played by education, upbringing, and family tradition in shaping practices related to ego-documents in general and to 'last' writings in particular; and thirdly, the interrelatedness of literature and of ego-documents written *in extremis*.¹

II. Carl von Hohenhausen and his 'Nachlaß'

Born in 1816, Carl was the youngest of three children and the only son of Elise (1789–1857) and Leopold von Hohenhausen (1779–1848). Carl grew up in a

¹ The material and observations presented in this article are part of my larger project that studies the characteristics of autobiographical writing before death as a social and literary practice in the nineteenth- to twenty-first centuries; from 2011 to 2014, research on this project was financed by the Leverhulme Trust and the John Fell Fund.

distinctly literary family.² Elise worked as an author and translator (first of Byron, then of Sir Walter Scott), and led salons in Berlin and Minden.³ Leopold was a Prussian civil servant with an interest in promoting regional literature and culture: he co-founded the *Mindener Sonntagsblatt*, and supported and wrote for a range of other journals, including that of his father Joseph Sylvius von Hohenhausen und Hochhaus (1743–1822), *Westphalen und Rheinland*. Leopold's sister, Henriette von Hohenhausen (1781–1843), was also a published author. Last, but certainly not least, Elise (1812–1899; married Rüdiger), the younger of Carl's two sisters, followed in her mother's footsteps and became an author and salonnière in her very own right, counting Annette von Droste-Hülshoff among her closest friends.⁴ Reading and writing as literary and social activities, then, were very much a part of the fabric of the Hohenhausens' daily family life and impacted on Carl from a very early age. It comes as no surprise that, in the end, they would also accompany him on his path toward a premature, self-chosen death.

Carl killed himself in the early hours of 5 April 1834 (around 3 a.m.) with one clear shot through the heart.⁵ At the time, he was in his first year as a student of the law at Bonn University. His suicide was reported and discussed in a range of contemporary publications, both immediately after it had happened and then again in 1836, when his mother published *Carl von Hohenhausen: Untergang eines Jünglings von achtzehn Jahren. Zur Beherzigung für Eltern, Erzieher, Religionslehrer und Ärzte*.⁶ The book is a collection of documents relating to Carl's suicide. The table of contents lists his diaries, which include a number of poems, smaller prose sketches, and aphorisms; his suicide notes, to three of which he added a postscriptum of considerable length; his last will and testament; a school essay on 'Christus als Ideal der Menschheit'; extracts from other letters Carl wrote to his parents; and a few short notes in his hand. A 'Biographie' penned by Elise opens the book; appended to Carl's writings are letters written by relatives and friends in

² For further bio-bibliographical information on the Hohenhausen family see the entries for 'Elise von Hohenhausen', 'Leopold von Hohenhausen', 'Henriette von Hohenhausen', and 'Elise Rüdiger', in *Lexikon Westfälischer Autoren und Autorinnen, 1750–1950* <<http://www.lwl.org/literaturkommission/alex/index.php?id=00000002>> [accessed on 12 November 2014].

³ Claudia Beleman describes Elise as one of the first 'professional' female authors of the early nineteenth century in 'Positionsbestimmung: Elise von Hohenhausen, geb. v. Ochs (1789–1857) zwischen Restauration und Revolution', *Westfälische Forschungen*, 45 (1995), 26–37 (26f.).

⁴ See Annelinde Esche, *Elise Rüdiger, geb. von Hohenhausen: Ein Bild ihres Lebens und Schaffens*, Inaugural-Dissertation (Emsdetten: Lechte, 1939).

⁵ The reason for Carl's suicide remains unclear. Markus Hänsel has argued that the young man buckled under the combined pressure of a physical ailment and the fact that his parents had pinned all their hopes on his success in life; see Hänsel, *Selbstmord im Biedermeier: Geistliche Restauration und Junges Deutschland in Dokumentation und Rezeption des Freitodes Carls von Hohenhausen* (Frankfurt a.M.: Lang, 1985), pp. 28f. Placing the Hohenhausens' ambition in the context of the '*Kampf ums Obenbleiben*' (italics in original) which affected many noble families at the time, Florian Kühnel has claimed that Carl took his life out of fear his professional performance might fall short of his family's expectations; see Kühnel, *Kranke Ehre? Adlige Selbsttötung im Übergang zur Moderne* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2013), p. 309.

⁶ Elise von Hohenhausen, *Carl von Hohenhausen: Untergang eines Jünglings von achtzehn Jahren. Zur Beherzigung für Eltern, Erzieher, Religionslehrer und Ärzte* (Braunschweig: Friedrich Vieweg und Sohn, 1836); further references to this work will be given in the main text using the abbreviation CvH.

response to the suicide; the autopsy protocol and a medical expert's comments on it; a long pedagogic essay by Wilhelmine Halberstadt (1776–1841); and, finally, a 165-page conclusion written by Leopold, which is really a treatise on a range of subjects he considered important in relation to his son's death.

Addressing parents, educators, and doctors, the publication's subtitle signals its didactic and moral thrust. The contributions by the parents and by Halberstadt are, broadly speaking, restorative in tendency: Elise and Leopold apportioned the blame for what happened to their son at least in part to a variety of societal and individual failings, one example being a prevailing scepticism with regard to religious dogmas such as belief in a personal God. Education policy and practice played a significant role in this context, as one of their particular grievances was that contemporary school curricula were allegedly neglecting children's religious education and demanded too much academic work from them too early.⁷

Equally, both parents considered poets and writers — primarily those associated with Romanticism — as to some degree responsible for Carl's suicide. Elise singles out Heine, whom she knew personally, Goethe, Victor Hugo, and also Byron. Their and other authors' works, Elise and Leopold claim, had failed to give readers — and especially the young — moral and religious guidance. Instead they had impressed them with the 'wrong' kinds of role model and world view: 'Überall in ihnen', writes Elise, 'trat ihm [i.e. Carl; MIMS] der Selbstmord als eine edle, heroische Handlung entgegen' (CvH, 42f.). This and similar accusations were, of course, everything but new. Ever since the late eighteenth century, the supposedly detrimental or, to be more precise, fatal influence of certain types of literature on young men and women who killed themselves had been the subject of intense public debate — in particular in the wake of Goethe's *Werther*.⁸ This topos continued to affect the public discourse on suicide, and in particular on 'literary' suicides, well into the early nineteenth century.⁹

However, while blaming the Romantics for corrupting Carl's thinking, his parents did not shy away from likening their son's personality and life-story to that of gifted, young, and equally ill-fated poets — as if this resemblance were a mark of distinction after all. Elise, for example, compared Carl to Byron, and Leopold appeared to recognize some of his son's character traits in Thomas Chatterton.¹⁰

⁷ For a more detailed discussion of this see Hänsel, *Selbstmord im Biedermeier*. It should be noted that this slim volume remains the most comprehensive study of Carl's suicide, its historical context, and its reception history to date and is still a very useful resource.

⁸ At least with regard to Goethe's epistolary novel, these debates should not be mistaken for historical evidence that literary texts did actually have the said effect. For a relatively recent critical assessment of the 'imitation suicides', see Martin Andree, *Wenn Texte töten: Über Werther, Medienwirkung und Mediengewalt* (Munich: Fink, 2006).

⁹ In the wake of their suicide pact in 1811, Heinrich von Kleist (1777–1811) and Henriette Vogel (1780–1811), to name one of the most famous examples, were accused of having suffered from 'Romanenschwärmerei': cf. Friedrich Benjamin Osiander, *Über den Selbstmord: Seine Ursachen, Arten, medizinisch-gerichtliche Untersuchung und die Mittel gegen denselben. Eine Schrift sowohl für Policei- und Justiz-Beamte, als für gerichtliche Ärzte, und Wundärzte, für Psychologen und Volkslehrer* (Hanover: Hahn, 1815), p. 300.

¹⁰ To highlight the similarities between the English poet and Carl, Leopold points in his conclusion to yet another writer, Alfred de Vigny and his play *Chatterton* (1835), from which he quotes (in translation). In a prefatory note to the extract, Leopold notes the 'surprising' parallels between his

In keeping with the Hohenhausens' rather ambiguous narrative on the relationship between literature and suicide, the epigraph of their book, adapted from Vicesimus Knox's (1752–1821) essay on Chatterton reads: 'unfortunate boy, short and evil were thy days!' (CvH, title page). In its original context, of course, the sentence continues: 'but thy fame shall be immortal'.¹¹

While the Hohenhausens' book, then, was clearly trying to set out an instructive example, it was at its heart emphatically also a monument to their dead son, whom they had loved and for whose future they had had great hopes. Through the publication of his personal documents, Carl was posthumously afforded a presence as a writer which he had never had in life. Framed by the comments of both his parents, Carl's texts — and his person — thus became publicly associated on a number of levels with the very thing that supposedly contributed to the young man's death: literature.

Not least in this respect, *Carl von Hohenhausen* might have reminded contemporaries of another, albeit different, monument to a literary suicide — Theodor Mundt's *Charlotte Stieglitz, ein Denkmal*, which had been published the previous year.¹² Born in 1806, Charlotte had taken her life in the same year as Carl, and her case had, of course, not escaped the Hohenhausens' attention: in his conclusion, Leopold describes her alongside his son as a gifted 'victim' of the times (CvH, 317–19), while Elise emphasizes that Charlotte's 'Nachlaß' would 'jedes fühlende Herz zu Thränen rühren' (p. 8). Notably, she, her husband, and Wilhelmine Halberstadt all referred to Carl's writings as a 'Nachlaß' as well, a choice of word that in itself is suggestive of literary qualities.¹³ It is undeniable that the parents' framing of Carl's texts in literary terms reflects their private and professional interests. To what extent, though, did the young man's 'legacy' justify or maybe even predetermine this posthumous, indirect, elevation to 'author' status?

III. The diaries — a literary project?

Carl himself stated that initially it had been the prospect of his own, impending death that had motivated him to write his diaries. In doing so, he claimed, he was following a very specific literary model: Victor Hugo's short novel, *Le Dernier Jour d'un Condamné* (1829): 'Wenn ich bisher sogenannte Tagebücher führte,' Carl notes in January 1833, 'so geschah das in der sichern Erwartung eines baldigen Todes. Sie sollten ein Gegenstück liefern können zu den drei letzten Tagen eines

son's diary prose and the 'Diction des plastischen Dialogs' and the 'Wortfügung' in Vigny's text (CvH, 400f.).

¹¹ Vicesimus Knox, 'On the poems attributed to Rowley', in *The Works of Vicesimus Knox: With a Biographical Preface*, 7 vols (London: Mawman, 1824), II: 115–19 (p. 117).

¹² [Theodor Mundt], *Charlotte Stieglitz, ein Denkmal* (Berlin: Veit & Comp., 1835). For more information on this remarkable case see the excellent study by Olaf Briesse, 'Charlotte Stieglitz. Ein Kunstprodukt', in *Vom Salon zur Barrikade: Frauen der Heinezeit*, ed. by Irina Hundt (Stuttgart and Weimar: Metzler, 2002), pp. 255–80.

¹³ The phrase 'Literarischer Nachlaß', attributed to Goethe, features among the prime examples in the first definition of the term in Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, 16 vols (Leipzig: Hirzel et al., 1854–1961), XIII: 89 (<http://woerterbuchnetz.de/cgibin/WBNetz/call_wbgui_py_from_form?sigle=DWB&mode=Volltextsuche&lemid=GN00690#XGN00690> [accessed on 5 November 2014]).

Verurtheilten von Victor Hugo' (CvH, 105). The comparatively late position of this remark in the diaries, the 'everyday' nature of the earliest entries, and the fact that Carl began to record his thoughts before Hugo's novel had even been published,¹⁴ suggest that he adopted this literary perspective retrospectively. His 'Nachlaß' does not give us any clues as to when or where exactly Carl might have come across Hugo's novel. However, the thought of suicide as a possible way to escape the physical as well as mental suffering he describes — and with it meditations on death — figure in the diary from as early as July 1830 (cf. CvH, 51). This also coincides with Carl's writing becoming a more regular activity than it seems to have been before.

More important than when exactly Carl adopted Hugo's novel as a model for his diary are the parallels between the two texts. To highlight only two examples: firstly, the novel takes the form of a journal written *in extremis* which preserves the diarist's last reflections; secondly, in Hugo's narrative, the reason for the convict's death remains undefined, and Carl's ruminations similarly leave it ultimately unclear why he must take his own life. It is worth noting that Hugo was accused of having plagiarized in his novel the journals of two men condemned to death that had been published in 1826 and 1828 respectively. Although the French author refuted this accusation, it seems that he was influenced by the original prison diaries and some of the sentiments expressed therein.¹⁵ The latter, albeit mediated by the fictional form of the novel, could have rung particularly true with someone in Carl's situation.

Carl's father and mother, and Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg in his *Evangelische Kirchen-Zeitung* (4 January 1837), all of whom picked up on Carl's mention of Hugo, did not reflect on any of the finer details: they regarded it simply as a reference to literature. While Elise and Leopold condemned it outright as a further example of 'Romantic' literature's fatal influence on their son, the theologian chose another line of attack when he accused Carl of misplaced — and 'unnatural' — literary ambition: 'auch ohne dieses Geständniß', he writes with regard to the reference to Hugo,

würde uns die Beschaffenheit der Tagebücher selbst hinreichend über ihren Zweck belehren. Alles erscheint darin als berechnet; überall ist die Absicht sichtbar, ein Kunstwerk darzustellen, und also als Dichter zu erscheinen, zugleich auch das Schauspiel seiner Kämpfe der Welt vorzulegen, und von ihr als Held bewundert zu werden, dessen Riesengröße grade in seinem Unterliegen, in seinem Kampfe mit dem Verhängniß recht sichtbar wird. — Überhaupt ist die Führung eines Tagebuches für die Jugend so unnatürlich, daß man fast mit Sicherheit auf einen Zweck des Ehrgeizes schließen kann, wenn anders die Anregung dazu aus dem eigenen Innern hervorgegangen ist.¹⁶

¹⁴ The first diary entry contained in *Carl von Hohenhausen* (p. 45) dates from 1828.

¹⁵ Myriam Roman, *'Le Dernier Jour d'un Condamné' de Victor Hugo* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), p. 152.

¹⁶ [Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg], 'Vorwort', *Evangelische Kirchen-Zeitung*, 1/1837 (4 January), p. 5.

Hengstenberg took the very existence of Carl's diary as an indicator of the young man's allegedly misguided character and accused him of intentionally dramatizing his sufferings and of casting himself in the roles of a hero and of a poet. This critique overshoots the mark. This is not only because it confuses cause and effect, and does by no means do justice to the young man's conflicting reflections on his writing, on his self, and on suicide. Hengstenberg also chose to ignore the fact that, at least since the late eighteenth century, the diary had been not only accepted but also recommended as a suitable form of writing exercise for older school children.¹⁷ Having said that, Hengstenberg also had a point: not only Carl's reference to Hugo but also, among other things, the various attempts at lyrical verse and poetic prose we find in the diaries may reasonably be taken as an indicator of youthful literary ambition.

In contrast to Hugo's protagonist, however, Carl seems not to have contemplated the publication of his papers. Even so, he most definitely kept posterity in mind when writing the diary, which he — like all his writing — kept secret, and considered as his confidant: 'Gehab' dich wohl, mein Büchlein, du ewiger Zeuge meiner Leiden. Ich weiß nicht, ob wir uns wiedersehen, wer weiß, ob die Vorsehung nicht endlich, endlich mein Leben fordert' (CvH, 100). The idea of the diary as a lasting 'witness' would return in the suicide notes, where Carl refers several times to his 'Papiere' as evidence of his long struggle against the need to kill himself (CvH, 128, 130, 139). He appears to have taken some time to edit his papers in order to make at least a portion of them more accessible. In the postscript to the first suicide letter, addressed to his father, composed on 26 March 1833, he writes: 'Meine Papiere habe ich zum Theil lesbarer gemacht, zum Theil umgeschrieben; die übrigen werdet Ihr schwerlich entziffern, sie waren zum Lesen nicht bestimmt, als für mich' (CvH, 163).

The need to rewrite a selection of his papers remains unexplained; one could speculate that Carl tried to shape his written legacy retrospectively, maybe in order to produce a more homogeneous account. Without access to the manuscripts (which have not survived) it is impossible to determine the extent of Carl's — or indeed his parents' — editing work. There is, however, an element of autobiographical, and one could also say poetic, 'intent' present in Carl's 'Nachlaß', which ties in with his literary upbringing, interests, and aspirations, and which is clearly motivated by and intertwined with the prospect of his suicide. Thus, a considerable part of Carl's texts could be characterised as a kind of consciously shaped 'écriture testamentaire' — as Robert Favre has called the fiction of speaking as if one were with at least one foot in the grave.¹⁸ At almost the same time and in a manner similar to Chateaubriand, who, in the 'Préface testamentaire' (1832/33) to his *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* (written 1809–41, published posthumously 1849–50), states: 'j'ai toujours supposé que j'écrivais assis dans mon cercueil',¹⁹ Carl repeatedly adopts the perspective of one who is

¹⁷ See Otto Ludwig, *Der Schulaufsatz: Seine Geschichte in Deutschland* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1988), p. 147.

¹⁸ Robert Favre, 'La mort-caution: l'écriture testamentaire', in *La Mort dans le Texte: Colloque de Cerisy*, ed. by Ernst Gilles (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1988), pp. 103–10.

¹⁹ François de Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d'Outre-Tombe*, ed. by Jean-Claude Berchet, 4 vols (Paris: Bords/Garnier, 1989–98), I (1989): 847.

already dead, or at least about to die, in his diary, in his last will — and in his suicide notes.

IV. The suicide notes — manuals and models

As soon as Carl began to compose his suicide notes to relatives, friends, and others, he seems to have more or less stopped writing anything else. The epistolary form appears as a continuation of the diary in several ways: the messages are written over a longer period of time, between March 1833 to April 1834; they serve as a vessel for Carl's reflections, in particular on suicide; and they record events that took place during the final year in his life. More importantly, though, the change from one type of ego-document to another positively affected the quality of Carl's prose: the epistolary form forced him to position himself with regard to its genre conventions; it provided him with an imagined audience for what he had to say; and it required him to demonstrate versatility and consideration in equal measure: by varying his style and tone depending on whom he addressed and by reflecting carefully on how he presented his thoughts. Last but not least, the awareness that his suicide notes would be his final words on this side of death may well have spurred Carl on as a writer: we learn from his letters that he tried to take his life at least twice before finally being successful, because he decides to narrate these 'failures'. Having found his 'theme', Carl slowly came into his own, with the account of his second suicide attempt, in Bonn, easily ranking among the most convincing pieces of prose he left behind (CvH, 191–94).

What, though, inspired Carl in the first place to abandon his diary and — unlike his fictional counterpart in Hugo's novel, for example — begin to write last letters? How did he know what suicides tended — or were at least expected — to say? Who, if anyone, could he have had in mind as a model? In the early nineteenth-century, there were no manuals on how to write a last letter. Yet letter writing manuals — including some specifically geared toward the needs of school-age children, abounded. While letter manuals published in German did not specifically include or mention last letters written *in extremis* as a type of letter, other, thematically related genres, such as letters of mourning, of condolence, and of consolation were an integral part of the manuals. Just like birthdays, marriage announcements, illness, and other key events in people's lives, death was established as one of the most conventional occasions on which people would write a letter. Generally speaking, letter writing was widely regarded as an important life skill, not least since, as for example the *Lehrbuch der Deutschen Stylistik für Studienschulen und Gymnasien* of 1833 put it, 'kein Stylstück kommt wohl so oft im Leben vor, als der Brief'.²⁰ At school, letter writing was therefore practised, and with some teachers it proved particularly popular as an exercise in style.²¹ Among the topics suggested for the latter purpose in the *Lehrbuch* we find, under the category 'Freundschaftsbrief', a letter of condolence and a suitable reply to it: 'Ferdinand drückt in einem Briefe an Albrecht sein Mitgefühl über den Tod der guten Mutter des Freundes aus. [...] Albrecht dankt seinem Freunde

²⁰ Johann Georg Beilhack, *Lehrbuch der Deutschen Stylistik für Studienschulen und Gymnasien* (Munich: Lindauer, 1833), p. 154.

²¹ Ludwig, *Der Schulaufsatz*, pp. 171f.

Ferdinand für seine Theilnahme, und schildert seinen gerechten Schmerz über einen so unersetzlichen Verlust.'²²

From Carl's suicide notes, some of which are of substantial length, one can gather that he must have received some formal training in the conventions of letter writing: the majority of his notes follow the rules on how to formulate and structure a letter as prescribed in *Lehrbuch der Deutschen Stylistik* and in contemporary manuals like the *Lehr- und Lesebuch für die obere Schülerklasse der Volksschulen* (1814), which lists the following as necessary components of a letter: 'Die Anrede, [...] die Einleitung, [...], die Veranlassung zu schreiben, [...], der Schluß, [...] die Unterschrift, [...] Adresse, [...]', and finally 'die Unterzeichnung des Ortes, wo, und des Tages und Monats, wann der Brief geschrieben wurde'.²³ Among these structural elements, the choice of address and the beginning of the letter, as well as the conclusion and the signature, are traditionally of particular significance: they open and close the act of communication and thus play a crucial part in defining the relationship between correspondents. In last letters written before death, beginning and end carry even more weight: the first lines make clear to the addressee what type of letter they are holding in their hands. Such openings can either serve to prepare someone gently for the bad news which they are about to receive — or to shock them with a cold, straightforward, or deliberately dramatic statement. Equally, the very last words with which a person takes leave of their correspondent, and to an extent also of the world, are their final chance to ask favours, to leave instructions, and most importantly to express feelings — about themselves and the other. They round off the image that the writer wants to leave to posterity of himself and of his approach to death.

In the majority of his messages, Carl von Hohenhausen adopted a gentle approach. His letter openings prepare the addressees for what they are about to read; the final paragraphs are dedicated to last wishes and greetings. In accordance with his relationship to the people he is writing to, Carl's salutations are either familiar or, mostly, polite; in particular, some of his final farewell gestures and signatures are more expressive and creative in adapting letter conventions to the situation. All this is already apparent in the very first suicide note Carl wrote, and which he addressed to his father:

Minden, den 18ten
März 1833.

Theurer unglücklicher Vater!

Bevor Du dieses liesest, gedenke der Vergänglichkeit des Irdischen,
der Trüglichkeit aller Hoffnungen; des Unterganges so vieles
Großen, welcher den des Kleineren übersehen läßt; der

²² Beilhack, *Lehrbuch der Deutschen Stylistik*, p. 157.

²³ Aloys Maier, *Lehr- und Lesebuch für die obere Schülerklasse der Volksschulen* (Salzburg: Mayer'sche Buchhandlung, 1814), p. 145. Carl was also aware that some of the material features of letters carried symbolic meaning: twice (CvH, 173, 194) he refers in his suicide notes to the colour of the sealing wax he is going to use and explains why he chooses red instead of black sealing wax. According to contemporary custom, the latter would have been used for letters containing sad news, in particular messages that announced a case of death.

Unsterblichkeit und ihrer Verheißungen, an die Du ja doch glaubst, und endlich der Vorsehung, welche Dich zum Manne schuf. —

Wenn ich so anfangen, kannst Du ahnen, wie ich enden werde. — In der That, nicht so schwarz diese Schrift als die Kunde, welche sie Euch bringt [...].

[...]

Bei Gott! theure Angehörigen, dieser Brief war bis jetzt die schwerste Arbeit meines Lebens. Noch einmal, um Euretwillen, fluchet mir nicht; laßt mir diesen einzigen Trost. Ja vergeßt, daß Euch jemals angehörte

Der Unglücklichste der Menschen
(CvH, 127, 139)

The carefully constructed opening of this suicide note alone makes evident that writing these lines, and all the others that followed them, was, as Carl himself said, in more than one sense 'hard work'.

In the main, Carl's suicide notes aimed to inform his relatives and friends of his death and to take farewell. The fact that large parts of the letters are taken up with reflections on their author's relationship with the respective recipient(s) indicates one of the reasons why Carl moved from diary to epistolary form: the letters allowed for personalized communication and could serve, at the same time, as a lasting, material manifestation of Carl's affection and respect for his addressees, that is his family, friends, and teachers. In this context, it should also be noted that Carl, while addressing individuals, was also writing to all of his recipients as a group. Repeatedly, there are references in the letters to messages written to a third party, which point to the fact that the writer must have expected his suicide notes to be circulated. The latter idea, together with the fact that Carl attempted to rationalize, and with that also legitimize, his decision — one of the main topoi of suicide notes — suggests that he was familiar not just with letter culture in general but in particular with last letters written before death and contemporary practices related to them.

Goethe's *Werther*, which Carl definitely knew from school, may have served him as a literary model in this regard. Apart from one or two emphatic formulations which resemble those of the fictional protagonist, such as 'das Pistol ist geladen' (CvH, 183), Carl may not have adopted the fictional suicide's use of language *in extremis* as a model. However, Carl's eclectic, individualized, and ultimately contradictory musings on life, death, and suicide are at least reminiscent of tendencies displayed in *Werther's* final letter to Lotte.²⁴ At the same time they reflect the education Carl received at the Prussian humanist Gymnasium he attended: in his suicide notes, there are references to Christian thought, in particular to Christ's seven last words; to philosophers and philosophy, albeit fairly general in nature; and to literature — both contemporary and classical: in an early suicide letter addressed to his schoolmates, Carl quoted from

²⁴ See Marie Isabel Schlinzig, *Abschiedsbriefe in Literatur und Kultur des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin and Boston: de Gruyter, 2012), pp. 212–23.

Horace's *Ars Poetica*: 'Sit jus liceatque perire!' (CvH, 140); although he leaves out the word 'poetis' which with the line ends in the original,²⁵ the allusion would have been clear to his readers. Thereby, Carl subtly aligned himself with the image of ambitious — and occasionally suicidal — poets of antiquity which Horace endorses. In other letters, Carl frames his life story and its end in literary terms in an attempt to communicate his decision as necessary and inevitable. 'Denkt euch', he writes, for example, to his fellow students in Bonn,

Ihr hättet einen Roman gelesen, dessen Helden durch einige Bände begleitet, und kämt nun an das letzte Capitel des letzten Bandes, wo der Autor [...] seinen Mann, statt ihm eine Frau zu geben, unbarmherzig abschlachtet. Da habt Ihr meine Geschichte. Die Bände sind Jahre, der Held bin ich und der Autor ist das Schicksal. (CvH, 177f.)

When writing his suicide notes, Carl, finally, might also have had one particular historical model in mind which was much closer to home: his grandmother on his father's side, Henriette Friederike von Hohenhausen (d. 1786). We learn from Leopold that she left behind not only a diary but also pious last letters which, after her death, were first circulated among family members and then later published for the benefit of a wider audience;²⁶ they are also reproduced in *Carl von Hohenhausen* as a corrective to her grandson's 'unseligen Irrthümer' (CvH, 277). In terms of subject matter and religious fervour, Henriette Friederike's last letters to her husband and young children differ markedly from those of Carl. This comes as no surprise: as a wife and mother who is preparing for a natural death, her writing carries a special authority and demands respect. Accordingly, she uses her last letters to share her feelings and beliefs, but also to impart last wishes and advice — especially with regard to her children's upbringing and their conduct in life.

Leopold insinuates that Carl would have known of his grandmother's 'Denkschriften' (CvH, 291; incidentally, the term is also used by Wilhelmine Halberstadt to designate Carl's texts, 222).²⁷ Of course, grandmother and grandson had very different reasons for setting their farewells down in writing: Henriette Friederike was concerned that her declining health might prevent her

²⁵ The complete sentence translates as: 'Let poets have the right and privilege of death.' (*Classical Literary Criticism*, ed. with an introduction and notes by D. A. Russell and Michael Winterbottom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 110).

²⁶ Henriette Friedrike Hohenhausen, *Denkschriften der Frau Henriette Friedrike, Freyfrau von Hohenhausen* (Bielefeld: Honäus Schriften, 1787). In addition to the last letters, this book contains the opening pages of Henriette Friederike's diary and an outline of self-imposed rules for pious self-conduct; all of these texts are also included in *Carl von Hohenhausen*. Henriette Friederike's last letters were reprinted in the *Taschenbuch für edle teutsche Frauen* (Leipzig: Heinrich Müller, 1802), pp. 183–206.

²⁷ Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, again with reference to Goethe, define 'Denkschrift' as a '*schrift zum andenken an eine person oder ereignis, memoria*' (II: 942; italics in original), although Goethe is thinking primarily of texts written by a third party to commemorate the deceased, not of autobiographical writings intended for posterity (<<http://woerterbuchnetz.de/DWB/?sigle=DWB&mode=Vernetzung&lemid=GD01580>>), [accessed 8 November 2014]).

from taking leave properly from her husband, and at the time of her death her children were too young to understand and appreciate her spiritual legacy. Carl had no choice but to compose suicide notes if he wanted to take leave of those closest to him, a situation he himself reflected on with regret.²⁸ Although Carl did not — and, in many ways, could not — follow the pious example given by his grandmother, he nevertheless adopted the same forms of ego-documents as she did. He also shared her sense of wanting to leave behind a written ‘Vermächtniß’ for posterity (CvH, 147), and specifically for his loved ones. Accordingly, the opening of Carl’s very last letter to his parents sounds like an echo of his grandmother’s last message to her children: Carl speaks of his ‘Zeilen’ as ‘das letzte Pfand meiner Liebe’ (CvH, 195) — Henriette Friederike had called hers ‘das letzte Denkmahl meiner Liebe’.²⁹

V. Some final words

The publication of Henriette Friederike’s and Carl’s writings *in extremis*, different in character as they may be, is testament both to the Hohenhausen family’s commemorative practices and to their wish to influence public discourse, not least in matters which directly concerned themselves. The respective didactic purposes as well as the reception of both books also point to a continuing, multi-layered public interest in ego-documents composed before death and suicide that reached its first zenith in the last third of the eighteenth century. Aside from their individual agenda, publications such as the Hohenhausens’ provided an audience of the early nineteenth century with information about genres, practices, and also functions of writing *in extremis*. In addition to family tradition, literary texts, newspaper reports, and of course personal experience in other areas of everyday life offered further models for learning how to write *in extremis*. As Carl’s ‘Nachlaß’ also showed, the actual practice of writing diaries or letters before death and suicide was shaped by the training and education one had received and by one’s adaptation of genre conventions.

Literary texts could themselves be inspired by autothanatographical ego-documents; they offered authors not only a specific model to imitate but also commonplace formulations and images which they could draw on to articulate the perspective on life that their confrontation with death had allowed them. Not least because religious texts, notably the Bible, had traditionally served as points of reference for exemplary texts written *in extremis*, conspicuous references to literary models or literary aspirations in autothanatographical texts could, as in Carl’s case, still lead to public attacks by more illiberally minded contemporaries. In comparison with end-of-life writing as displayed in diary form, the epistolary mode offered writers both a set of conventions and an audience which posed a ‘positive’ challenge that inevitably influenced the development and quality of their

²⁸ In the farewell letter to his teachers he exclaims: ‘O, daß ich auch von Ihnen nur durch todtes Papier Abschied nehmen kann!’ (CvH, 158).

²⁹ Hohenhausen, *Denkschriften*, p. 19. At the beginning of this letter, Henriette Friederike writes from the perspective of one who is already dead; Carl could have picked up this trope from his grandmother.

writing. Ultimately, then, circumstances forced Carl von Hohenhausen to make suicide his main 'subject', and he kept writing toward it until his time had come.